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Elinor Ostrom: Uncommon

Kenneth A. Shepsle
Harvard University

I first met Elinor Ostrom in the early 1970s. I was an assistant professor at Washington University, St. Louis, and she was a recently tenured associate professor at Indiana University who traveled to St. Louis from Bloomington on a regular basis to ride around dicey urban neighborhoods in police cruisers. Her research focused on metropolitan governance with special emphasis on the delivery of urban services of which police protection was a prime example. She was a member of the recently founded Public Choice Society (indeed, her spouse Vincent was a founding member) and was an adherent of the rational choice approach to social phenomena that later came to be identified under the banners of the Rochester School, the Virginia School, and the Bloomington School. But Elinor Ostrom was an uncommon scholar, and this shall be the theme of my brief contribution to this collection.

According to conventional categories, Lin was a student of public administration. Her studies of urban services comfortably fit into the scope of this hoary field of learning. Her earliest publications, going back more than forty years, were mainly aimed at this community of scholars. But traditional public administration, perhaps because of her early exposure to theoretical arguments in general and analytical theories in particular, was not for her. The first sense, then, in which Lin was an uncommon scholar was in her intuitive sense of the need for intellectual arbitrage – between traditional public administration and analytical theories that put the understanding of human motivations on a firm footing.

A second sense in which Lin was uncommon in approach, indeed prescient, was (and continues to be) her inclination to get into the field. Riding around in those police cruisers in St. Louis and other metropolitan areas provided Lin with a fine-grained empirical sense of the micro-structure of public bureaucracies. They are not abstract, not undifferentiated, not homogenous, and not simple. No organizational flow-chart can adequately capture the nuances or realities of a real bureaucracy. The distance between the cop on the beat or in the patrol car at the base and the police commissioner at the apex – spatial, intellectual, informational – is vast, putting a premium on the capacity of a bureau to manage itself, to incentivize its participants, and to transmit and evaluate information, all of which are necessary for adequate, if not high, performance. Lin unpacked the bureaucracies found in public administration texts into essential components by experiencing them first-hand in the field, something she was to repeat throughout her career, most

especially in her path-breaking analyses of common-pool resources. She was to public administration what Richard Fenno was to the U.S. Congress – a political anthropologist studying the natives in their own habitats. With the exception of Fenno and a few others, Lin was original in the American politics context in engaging in “soaking and poking” field work.

A third sense in which Lin Ostrom proved uncommon was not only in moving from theory to practice, as noted above, but also among empirical strategies. She was comfortable in the field, in the laboratory, doing statistical analysis, conducting meta-analysis of existing empirical work. Her research-methods quiver was full and she used every arrow in it.

The final sense that I will discuss in which Lin is uncommon, perhaps the most significant sense, is her capacity to tolerate complexity and to elaborate its consequences. As she observed in her Nobel address, “Complexity is not the same as chaos.”¹ This theme reverberates in all her work over nearly half a century. But it is especially penetrating in the questions that have preoccupied her these last two decades, namely: Are rational individuals hopelessly trapped in dilemmas? Are groups stuck overgrazing common pastures, overexploiting their forests, fisheries, and water supplies, overpolluting their rivers, lakes, oceans, and atmosphere? In short, are we doomed to equilibrium traps, to inefficient Nash equilibria? Her optimistic responses to these questions are not those of a Pollyanna, but rather are based on her experiences in the field and the laboratory and rooted in analysis. She finds strong effects on overcoming equilibrium traps in communities in which there is the self-governing authority to form agreements and create (and amend) practices endogenously, the capacity to monitor these, the ability to enforce them and/or the opportunity for exit, and the development of trust. While very small groups allow for considerable autonomy and very large ones are able to exploit economies of scope and scale, at least in principle, it is small to medium-sized associations that optimize between autonomy and scope and scale on the one hand and the ability to foster institutions that allow for trust, monitoring, and enforcement on the other. (It was, as Lin discovered in her earliest work, the medium-sized communities, not the small towns or large cities, whose policing industries performed best.) These arrangements are often messy, complex, the very opposite of impersonal or stream-lined.

In summarizing Elinor Ostrom’s contributions to social science and public policy, I would like to emphasize something I associate with the game theory revolution in economics in the late 1970s. When von Neumann and Morgenstern first popularized game theory for social scientists

¹ Her twenty-eight minute address is a treat to which I commend the reader. It may be found at: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/2009/ostrom-lecture.html.

in the 1940s, economists initially thought they had died and gone to heaven. (The reviews of this work in economics journals at the time suggested as much.) Within a very few years, however, the profession had turned its theoretical attention elsewhere, with general equilibrium replacing game theory as the theoretical approach of choice. Game theorists during the 1950s and 1960s, mainly cooperative game theorists, grew defensive, felt misunderstood, and essentially pulled their wagons into a circle; they became a self-contained and self-absorbed community, confident in its own research agenda and relatively thin-skinned when it came to criticism. Critics even from within the fold, like Thomas Schelling, were often treated as traitors, not innovators.

I am not sure what happened in the mid- to late 1970s aside from the growing emphasis on non-cooperative approaches to games – generational change rather than learning is my guess – but I believe the game-theoretic revolution in economics that began to take hold at that time benefited from the fact that game theorists took their critics seriously rather than dismissively, grew much more experimental and open-minded, and regarded new ideas as challenges worthy of consideration rather than as the views of uninformed detractors. In recent times there has been a touch of defensiveness among practitioners of a mature rational choice theory in political science (in which I include myself) reminiscent of the cooperative game theorists of the 1950s: confident in their research agenda, like those cooperative game theorists, and just as thin-skinned when it came to criticism. Lin Ostrom’s research, emphasizing governance, institutions, complexity, and empirical context, reflects an experimental open-mindedness to observed regularities, even when they seemed inconsistent with “the canon,” and a willingness to incorporate rather than dismiss challenges. She is not alone in this, of course, but her *modus operandi* has made rationality-based approaches more inclusive and positioned it more closely to mainstream political science. It has enriched our theories and, at the same time, enriched political science as well.